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Spy story shows an ugly business

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The tangled tales these days of Soviet defectors and refectors remind me of my involvement in one of these episodes a few years ago. The experience was brief, but it afforded me some insight in that murky world.

I came away with the conclusion that the agents and counteragents and counter-counteragents who populate the clandestine services are probably less efficient than the police officer on the corner.

And they often get away with murder in the very real sense of the term because, operating in secrecy, they cannot be held accountable.

My story has its origins in 1959, when a Soviet naval officer by the name of Nicholas Shadrin escaped from Poland to Sweden, claimed political asylum and eventually was taken to the United States after polygraph tests supposedly showed that his defection was sincere.

He was accompanied by Ewa Gora, a Polish woman later to become his wife — an indication that his flight from communism may have had more personal than political motives.

In Washington, after passing additional tests to prove his honesty, Shadrin was given a job in the Pentagon as an analyst of information on the Soviet navy. Soon afterward, a tough decision confronted him.

He was approached by a member of the KGB, the Soviet espionage organization, and asked to work as a spy for his former homeland. He reported the overture to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which saw a chance to use him.

The FBI turned him into a "double" — furnishing him with phony data to pass on to the KGB so that, in the process, he could report back on the activities on the Soviet apparatus. From then on, Shadrin met with KGB men in different places.

On Dec. 18, 1975, Shadrin arrived in Vienna with his wife, ostensibly on a skiing vacation. In fact, he was due to meet there with the KGB. He left his hotel room in the late afternoon — and vanished. A local CIA agent, assigned to keep an eye on him, evidently bungled.

I entered the act a couple of years later after Mrs. Shadrin, dissatisfied

with the U.S. government's handling of the case, hired a private lawyer, Richard Copaken, to find her husband. Copaken called me after his various efforts had gone nowhere.

He had learned through a mutual friend that I knew Victor Louis, a KGB agent who poses as a Soviet journalist. Copaken asked me to set up a session with Louis. I agreed after Copaken pledged me exclusive rights to the story when we reckoned it would not jeopardize Shadrin.

I thereupon contacted Louis and arranged for him to meet us in Helsinki. I told Louis nothing of the subject in advance.

Our encounter in Helsinki was like a scene from "Mission Impossible." We sat on a park bench while Copaken explained to Louis that Shadrin was an innocent tourist who had been abducted by the KGB.

Louis, however dubious a character, is no fool. He took me aside later and said: "Nonsense. The days of kidnapping defectors are over. That Shadrin must have been a double agent or something fishy."

Nevertheless, Louis promised Copaken to look into the affair — but not before he had told the lawyer that, in exchange, he wanted his legal help in a libel action he was pursuing in the United States.

Nothing came of that meeting.

The Shadrin case dragged on. President Ford raised it with Leonid Brezhnev, the late Soviet leader, to no avail. The CIA and FBI continued their investigations, without success.

Finally, the other day, a recent Soviet defector disclosed to CIA interrogators what had happened to Shadrin, and his revelation had the ring of plausibility — or so U.S. agents believe.

According to the defector's account, Shadrin had indeed been abducted in Vienna in 1975 by KGB operatives who intended to pump him for information. But in a struggle that ensued, they tried to silence him with chloroform and instead killed him with an overdose.

Thus the KGB men had bungled the job as badly as had everyone else in the business. Quite plainly, it is a business with a wide margin for error.

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